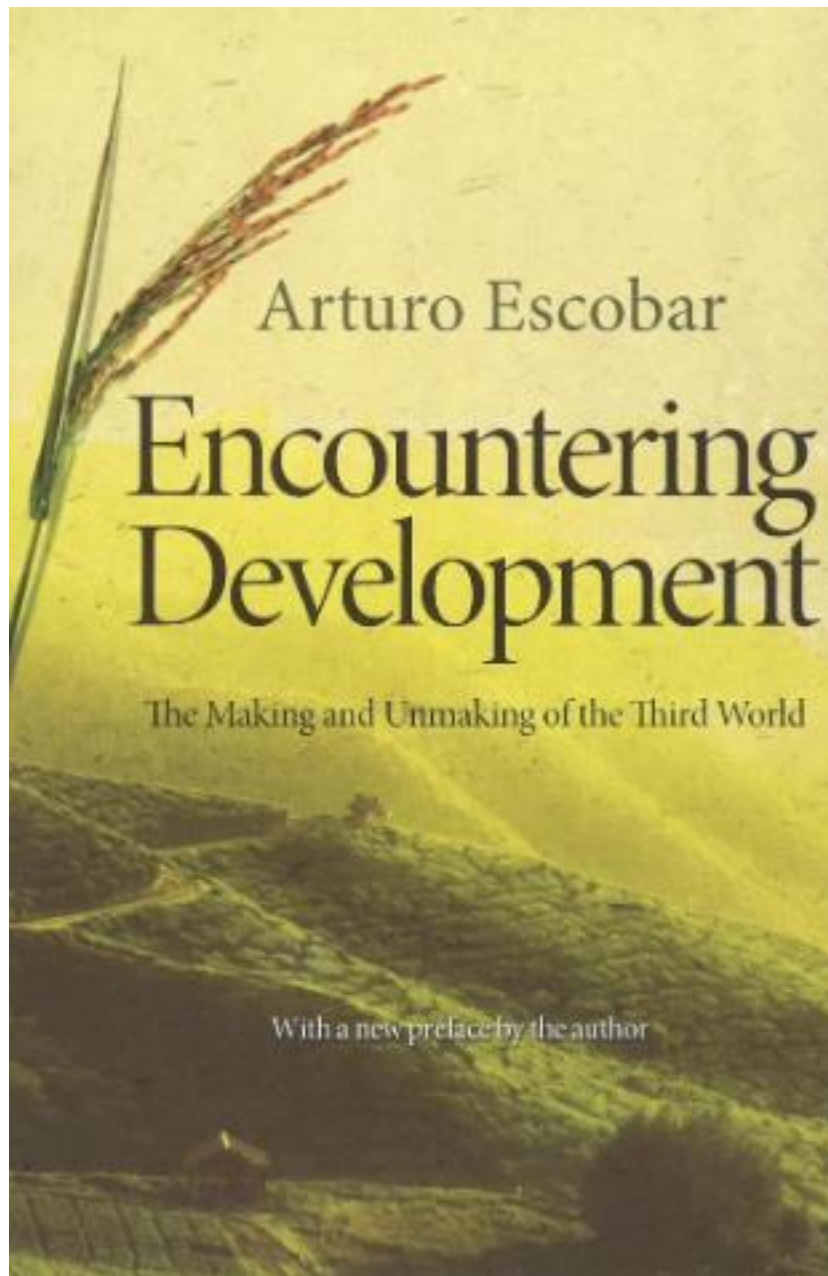**A review of 'Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World' by Arturo Escobar**

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Citation

Abstract

Arturo Escobar's 'Encountering Development' has generated debates within the social sciences about how language has been used by development institutions in order to frame problems in a particular way to assume control over the Global South. This review will build on these arguments by providing a critique of Escobar's book and will point to a future in which we can rethink development. By exploring the labels of 'poverty', 'hunger' and 'women', I will build on existing arguments about how development institutions have used these terms to benefit the Global North at the expense of the Global South. Many critics of development, including Escobar, suggest an erasure of 'development' all together, yet there seems to be no viable alternative. I will suggest that 'development' may have a place in the future, so long as it can be rethought in order to truly benefit the people who it was originally meant to help.

1. Introduction

Escobar's 'Encountering Development' challenges the construction of 'development' and how development discourse has invented the world (Escobar, 1995). Discourse is defined as 'meaningful symbolic behaviour' (Blommaert, 2005:2), so investigating discourse requires an examination into language and action. As Escobar argues, development discourse is used to justify policy and intervention in the Global South. Escobar suggests that we need to 'unmake and unlearn development' (Escobar, 1995:223), calling for practitioners and thinkers to find alternatives to the discourse of development. 'Encountering Development' has been a highly influential book, generating debates regarding how discourse is strategically used by development institutions as a way of constructing problems to control the Global South. Escobar explores how the making of the 'Third World' is a method of control, since the 'Third World' is a label itself.

This review will begin by examining the power of words in constructing a reality of the world, defining what counts as legitimate knowledge, eventually becoming 'common sense' (Dryzek, 2005 in Wanner, 2015). Following the narrative that discourse is a means of controlling people's lives in the Global South, I will critique development through three labels. Labelling makes people into cases to be solved (Escobar, 1995), acting as a justification for interventions and control. Firstly, 'poverty', in how it has been defined and used to reinforce existing power relations between the Global North and South. Next, I will examine how hunger is a key label within development discourse and how its conceptualisation and consequent policies have exacerbated food insecurity in the Global South. I will critique Escobar's lack of acknowledgement of the importance of scale within hunger discourse. I will then tie the themes of poverty and hunger together; critiquing how women have been framed in development discourse as 'problems' and how subsequent policy interventions have been deployed to control their lives. Poverty and hunger are made into a common enemy to be fought (MacAuslan, 2009) and are constructed as issues which are solvable through economic intervention (Green, 2006).

2. Discussion

2.1. The power of words

Cornwall argues that 'Words make worlds' (2007:471), reflecting the power of words in constructing a so-called reality. Development discourse harnesses this notion to justify interventions (Cornwall, 2007). Importantly, development has used discourse in order to present itself as an inherently positive term (Cornwall, 2007), which is key in its persistence. Escobar explains how the International Bank adopted the lexicon 'Salvation' which infantilised the Global South and invented the course of 'development' as the only plausible way to progress (Escobar, 1995). This view persists today, with development being seen as desirable (Escobar, 1995). The infantilisation of the Global South links with the idea that there are actors with needs and actors who can meet those needs (Naylor, 2011). Discourse constructs these identities (Doty, 1993); the way in which these constructions are repeated and embedded has implications for perceptions of reality. After all, knowledge does not occur in a vacuum; institutions and actors are responsible for the creation and fostering of knowledge (Madrueño and Tezanos, 2018). Escobar acknowledges the power of 'labelling' within development discourse. Labels such as 'poverty' are used to invent target populations who are exposed to policy interventions, objectification and measurement (Eyben, 2007). This makes people into objects which can be used to measure intervention success. Additionally, power is tied to labels, whereby there are those who define labels and those who live within images imposed upon them (Wood, 2007). Therefore, words are far from neutral – they frame and shape the world we know. Evidently, they enable us to define what is thought of as a social problem and thus plays a role in determining the 'solutions' to such problems. Development discourse has used the power of labels to normalise development for 'addressing' issues such as poverty and hunger; allowing for development institutions to yield considerable control over the Global South.

2.2. Labels in development discourse

Development discourse has utilised the label 'poverty', labelling two thirds of the globe as 'poor' after World War 2 (Escobar, 1995). Although poverty is a contested term with no agreed definition (Brown, 2017), most definitions have been constructed by development institutions (Misturelli and Heffernan, 2008). Thus, poverty is a form of social construction which institutions have used to evoke images of helplessness (Dean, 1992). By development institutions constructing their own definitions around poverty, they have invented so-called solutions and therefore exert power over the Global South. Development institutions usually conceptualise poverty as behavioural rather than structural to divert responsibility for poverty from the rich (Wood, 2007). For example, a long tradition of Malthusian theory has linked high fertility rates with poverty in the Global South (Merrick, 2002). Although this may be partially true, recent research has shown that declining fertility does not result in economic growth, since it creates a new dependent group, made up of an older, non-working population (Merrick, 2002). Therefore, the Malthusian perspective is rather archaic by inventing a correlation between poverty and population growth. The most common 'solution' for poverty is economic growth; involving the integration of the poor into global markets (Hickel, 2016), which persists today. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has announced that the number of undernourished people has halved 'in the past two decades because of rapid economic growth' (UNDP, 2020:n.p). This avoids addressing structural questions about the redistribution of wealth alongside the root causes (Misturelli and Heffernan, 2008). Therefore, development discourse is manipulated so the rich continue to be benefitted at the expense of the poor. Escobar argues that 'poverty' has

been invented in discourse due to social unrest in poor countries which constitute a threat to the Global North (Escobar, 1995). Green supports this idea, stating that representations of poverty centre on the normative idea of social order, whereby poverty is perceived as a threat (Green, 2006). By externalising poverty from its root causes of historical and social relations, it is invented as an issue which must be erased in order to maintain social functionality (Green, 2006). Thus, poverty has been framed by development discourse to disconnect it from the current unjust economic system, and the solutions are defined through economic growth, which are imposed upon the Global South by development institutions, as a means of control and maintaining unequal power relations. This is not to negate the existence of poverty, which is a priority global issue (Hulme, 2015) – but it does necessitate a different framing – one which confronts the Global North's role in contributing to poverty in the Global South.

Hunger is another label which falls under poverty (Green, 2006). Addressing hunger in terms of food security is seen as a way of alleviating poverty and expanding economic growth (Jarosz, 2011). Escobar argues that the symbolism of hunger is a powerful social and political force; a striking example of the power of the Global North over the South. Hunger discourses are problematic in this sense. They are associated with zeal and projects where the Global North speaks for the most vulnerable and weak in the sense that 'Hungry 'others' are constructed as victims we can help' (Young, 1999:100), evoking images of helplessness, much like poverty. Development discourse does not contemplate the idea that hunger is a consequence of networks of production and distribution that the whole world is part of (Young, 1999). Much like poverty, hunger has been conceptualised economically which has justified the involvement of the World Bank in nutrition (Sridhar, 2007). Additionally, development institutions have dominated the invention of definitions for 'hunger', which has been changed over time to accommodate the preferences of development institutions (Jarosz, 2011).

Jarosz (2011) draws on the importance of scale in defining 'hunger' in development discourse, which, he argues, has deepened the dependence of poorer countries on food imports from wealthier countries, exacerbating, rather than alleviating food insecurity. Surprisingly, Escobar neglects the importance of scale in his book, which is a key component of the Global North's control over the South. In 1979, food security was defined at the national scale and the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) focus turned to helping the Global South become self-sufficient (Jarosz, 2011). For example, in Rwanda, community silos were built in selected rural communities, giving farmers a place to store crops to stabilise prices, reduce losses and move towards self-sufficiency at a time of food price volatility (FAO, 1979 in Jarosz, 2011). In the 1982 World Food Council Meeting, the Global South proposed that 12 million tonnes of grain be stockpiled in their nations for when cereal prices rose, however, the US, Canada and Australia, who, importantly were the world's largest grain exporters, rejected this proposition, resulting in the Global south developing a deeper dependence on importing food (Jarosz, 2011). By tightening connections between local and global markets, local food production is discouraged, making people more susceptible to rises in global food prices (Raudsepp-Hearne et al., 2010). Moreover, the World Bank put Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in place, emphasising comparative advantage, placing control of grains firmly in the hands of the US, Canada, western Europe and Australia; moving the scale of food security from national to micro-level

individuals (Jarosz, 2011). Therefore, development has constructed hunger, resulting in the Global South being forced to become increasingly reliant on the Global North for food imports. The goal of self-sufficiency at the national level could reduce vulnerabilities in the Global South created by over-dependence on food imports (Agarwal, 2014) but, this would reduce profitability of exports from the Global North, which they are evidently not willing to embrace. By shifting the definition of food security from national to individual level, the Global North benefits by increasing imports to the Global South, whilst the South becomes increasingly food insecure. This demonstrates how constructing hunger is a means of controlling the Global south to benefit the Global North.

Escobar argues that women have become associated with poverty and hunger, as a homogenous group. Development discourse undermines the productivity of women, portraying them as reproducers (Escobar, 1995). Repeating this discourse means that development planners associated women with traditional culture and were consequently seen as hindrances in 'modernising' the Global South (Young, 1993 in Singh, 2007). The introduction of Women in Development (WID) saw women as an economic investment (Singh, 2007), neglecting their right to be autonomous human-beings (Escobar, 1995). The World Bank targeted their nutrition programmes towards pregnant and lactating women, because she must ensure the health of a future member of the workforce and breastfeeding was encouraged for contraception (Sridhar, 2007). In some versions of development discourse, women have been perceived as 'breeders' and much blame has been placed upon reproduction for issues of poverty and hunger (Hartman, 1998). Escobar states that development institutions frame population growth in such a way that 'Having too many babies… was a curse they imposed upon themselves' (1995:162). Thus, development discourse has framed women as hinderances which has justified interventions in terms of economic growth and nutrition to alleviate poverty. By implementing programmes which focus on limiting population growth, women's rights as agents in their own lives are neglected, whilst control by the Global North over the Global South is demonstrated.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion this review has explored how development discourse has been used to control the Global South, through utilising the labels of poverty, hunger and gender. Definitions of each label have been constructed by development institutions; separating the cause from the problem and allowing for development institutions to retain control. I have demonstrated the importance of scale in constructing hunger, which, I argue, Escobar did not pay enough attention to. Finally, I have shown how women have been problematised and made into objects of development interventions to address hunger and poverty. Although Escobar attacks 'development' he proposes no viable alternative, merely suggesting that the answers may lie in local planning (Escobar, 1995). Alternatively, Cornwall (2007) argues that our task should be transforming society and development. Therefore, 'development' might have a place in the future, if it can encapsulate social change and be redefined. In his more recent work, Escobar strengthens his arguments through exploring transition discourses such as degrowth and postdevelopment as alternatives to development (Escobar, 2015; Kothari et al., 2019). The Great Transition paradigm redefines human progress in terms of non-material human fulfilment, whereby human wellbeing is decoupled from growth and consumption (Escobar, 2015). This

paradigm has clear potential but remains under-researched. Further work could focus on beginning to bridge this gap to combat social and environmental challenges. Escobar exposes the shortcomings of development discourse and how it has been manipulated to benefit the Global North. By critiquing development, it is important not to negate the existence of problems – instead, a new framing is necessary. Exposing these issues has generated debates about the way in which development discourse is constructed, and as it continues to be critiqued, 'development' may be reconstituted in a way where it benefits the poor people it was always meant to help.

4. Acknowledgements

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